June 4, 2015

100 Deadliest Days of Summer

Motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death among North Carolina teens. A new study by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety finds that teen motorists are also a significant danger to others. In 2013, of the 108 people killed in North Carolina crashes involving a driver aged 15-19, 30 percent were the young drivers themselves, 25 percent were other teen passengers in the car, and 38 percent were occupants of the other vehicle. North Carolina ranked 4th nationally in total deaths caused by teen drivers that year.

National data suggests that the 100 days between Memorial Day and Labor Day are the deadliest of the year for teen drivers. According to AAA, fatalities related to teen driving increase by as much as 26 percent during the summer months compared to other times of the year. Over a five-year period (2009-2013), there were 650 deaths among 16- to 19-year-olds in North Carolina during the summer months. Teen traffic deaths peak on Fridays and Saturdays.

Featured Report

Teen Driver Crashes: 1994-2013

Take a look at 20 years of teen driver accident data.

Featured Website

NC Crash Data

Check out interactive NC accident data by county, age, month, other variables.

Featured IEI Initiative: Summer in the Commons

IEI is proud to be engaging 1000+ youth this summer. More here.
Fortunately, teen driver deaths have been declining nationally and in North Carolina for at least ten years. Many believe that state legislation passed in 2011 that imposed increased requirements on teen license applicants has further contributed to this decline. Still, North Carolina has the 13th highest number of deaths involving a teen driver in the nation.

The role of state government

In 1953, North Carolina began requiring public schools to provide driver training and education to students, paid for by a $3.00 vehicle registration surcharge. During the 1980s, however, legislators reallocated those proceeds to the state’s general fund. Today, the nearly $27 million appropriated for driver’s education comes from the NC Highway Trust Fund and the general fund. This sum does not fully cover program costs, which can work out to as much as $400 per student, so schools are allowed to charge families up to $65 for each teen in driver’s ed to make up the shortfall.

But that could all change by the end of this month. Last year, the NC General Assembly chose not to renew funding for driver’s ed in an effort to lessen the burden on the state Highway Fund and reduce the reach of state government. As a result, school districts will have to determine how they will pay for this mandated program, and will likely seek permission to pass on the full cost to families. The NC Driver Traffic
and Safety Education Association estimates that imposing fees of up to $400 per student would result in a 50% reduction in driver’s ed participation. Put another way, it could result in 50,000 more unlicensed teen drivers, some of whom will inevitably choose to drive anyway, whether to get to a needed job or otherwise. Some observers therefore conclude that imposing driver’s ed fees in schools will lead to an upsurge in accidents on North Carolina’s roadways.

It may not come to that. HB 919, introduced last month, proposes the use of unclaimed lottery funds to help support driver’s education for the 2015-2016 fiscal year, and use of motor vehicle registration late fees the year following. The bill would also reduce the current cap for families from $65 to $45. The House budget bill reflects these changes, but it’s not yet known if the Senate budget will do the same.

A Pathway

For most teens, obtaining a driver’s license is a rite of passage, one more step on the road toward adulthood. It’s also a path to income, opportunity, and broader community engagement -- not to mention a lesser burden on their free taxi service providers (aka mom and dad). As we set our sights on the sunny days of summer ahead, let’s remind our teen drivers to take reasonable precautions. Let’s also hope North Carolina’s teens will continue to receive high quality driver education, for everyone’s safety.

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